3 THE PATTERNS OF GRAMMAR

The very popular statement that "grammar is a lot of nonsense" contains a great deal of truth, though not quite in the way that is usually intended. Let's look at some nonsense and see what we can learn from it:

The floog sirily mirlated naxes with a sool pern.

Since most of the words are strange we don't know exactly what this statement means, but we do know the following things:

1. Whatever happened, the *floog* did it.	Clue—position
2. There was probably only one *floog*.	" no *-s* ending
3. It was done to the *naxes*.	" position
4. There was more than one *nax*.	" *-es* ending
5. The action of *mirlating* is over.	" *-ed* ending
6. *Sirily* tells something about how it was done.	" *-ly* ending
7. *With a pern* tells more about how it was done.	" word *with*
8. There was only one *pern*.	" word *a*
9. *Sool* tells what kind of a pern it was.	" position

We know these things because our language contains a system of patterns which convey what is called "structural meaning" almost without regard to the dictionary meanings of the particular words used. As the clues above indicate, the main elements in the patterns of written English are:

Word order, or relative *position*
Word form (usually, but not always, a matter of endings)
Function words like *a, the,* and *with,* which are more important for what they tell us about how other words are used than for exact meanings of their own.

In spoken English at least three other elements called *pitch, stress,* and *juncture* must be recognized. These are to some extent implied in writing, but cannot be indicated as explicitly as the first three. We will therefore postpone discussing them until we have seen how the more obvious elements work.

It used to be believed that a language was made up simply of words, which had only to be arranged according to the logical rules of "universal grammar" in order to make good sentences. It is now recognized that there is no such thing as universal grammar. Each language has its own patterns as well as its own words, and these patterns are matters of habit rather than logic. We have been exposed to our own particular patterns of word form, word order, and function words for so long that we now react to them automatically even when they are filled with nonsense words. If there were just one dialect of English we could use them automatically, too, and not have to think about them. But most of us have grown up in such a confusing mixture of dialects that simple imitation is not enough. In order to speak and write with accuracy and confidence we have to make some sort of study of the competing patterns; and we'd better make the study systematic so that we'll know when we have covered the ground.

Grammatical Position

In analyzing our nonsense sentence we gave only one clue for each bit of information, as if the three elements of position, word form, and function words could be completely separated. Actually they cannot. For instance, grammatical position is not merely numerical position in a sentence but relative position; and we recognize it by considering word form and function words as well as word order. Take another look at the first four words of our sentence:

The floog sirily mirlated

We know that the *floog* did the *mirlating*—that it is what we call the subject—not by the fact that it is the second word in the sentence, but by taking all the following facts together:

1. When we see a pattern like "The _____ _____ _____ed" we assume that the word ending in *-ed* is the verb, and that one of the two words between *the* and _____*ed* is the subject.
2. Since the word just before the verb ends in *-ly* it almost certainly

tells something about the verb and therefore cannot be the subject.

3. Therefore the other possible word—*floog*—is the subject. (Notice that if the sentence had begun "The floog *siliry*" instead of "The floog *sirily*" we would take *siliry* to be the subject and *floog* to be an adjective modifying it.)

It is obvious that the study of grammatical position could become a pretty complicated subject, but we don't have to go into it very deeply. To begin with we are interested only in the way it can help us to classify four important kinds of words.

The Kinds of Words

We have to classify words in order to discuss them in groups. Even in the last section we had to use the terms *verb* and *adjective*, though we have not yet had time to define these; and if we couldn't say things like "the possessive form of a noun is always written with an apostrophe" it would take quite a while to cover the language. Unfortunately, nobody has ever found a perfect way to classify words in English. The two most obvious ways are by form and by meaning. If we base our classes on either one of these we run into trouble with the other; if we try to use both at once we get a complicated mess; and if we decide to have two separate classifications we find that they overlap so much that it is very difficult to keep them separate.

As a compromise, not perfect but reasonably workable, we will use in this book a system based on three main principles:

1. We will use such familiar *single* terms as *noun* and *adjective* to designate the ways words and word-groups function in sentence patterns.

2. We will use such *double* terms as *inflected noun* or *regular noun* (which means "noun inflected in a certain way") to discuss forms and form changes.

3. We will not bother to classify a word at all unless we have a definite reason for doing so. And if a word happens to be both a noun (by use) and an inflected noun (by form) we will use whichever designation seems to be handiest at the time.

Classification by Position

We began this chapter by analyzing a sentence composed of three familiar words, *a, the,* and *with,* and six nonsense words, *floog, sirily, mirlated, naxes, sool,* and *pern.* We could of course make up any number of similar sentences; and if we made up, say, ten pages of them, we should discover the curious fact that all the nonsense words could be reasonably put into just four classes:

1. Words that pattern like *floog, naxes,* and *pern,* which can be called *nouns.*
2. Words that pattern like *mirlated,* which can be called *verbs.*
3. Words that pattern like *sool,* which can be called *adjectives.*
4. Words that pattern like *sirily,* which can be called *adverbs.*

The nucleus of an English sentence is a combination like *man is* or *girls sang* or *floog mirlated,* in which one word seems to name something and the other seems to say something about it—even if both words are nonsense or completely unknown. In such combinations we call the naming word the subject—and the kind of word that is or could easily be the subject we call a *noun.* The saying word we call the *verb.* Words that seem to describe nouns we call adjectives—*big* man, *young* girls, *sool* pern. And words that seem to describe verbs we call *adverbs—probably* was, *merrily* sang, *sirily* mirlated.

Far more than ninety-nine per cent of all the words in English fall into these four classes, and more are being added to them every year. They are therefore called open or unlimited classes. There is nothing surprising about seeing an unfamiliar word in a position that seems to indicate any one of these classes; and even if we are quite sure that the word has no real meaning we somehow feel that we know how it acts.

All the other kinds of words (which we will not classify just now) total only a few hundred all together, and no new ones are being added. We have to know these words individually to react to the patterns of our sentences; and if we replace them by nonsense words the patterns disappear. Let's try it:

Pra floog sirily mirlated naxes tran oc sool pern.

Possibly the successive endings *-ly, -ed,* and *-es* still suggest some meaning, but there is no longer a firm pattern for the sentence as a whole. Nonsense substitutes for *a, the,* and *with* won't work.

At first glance classification by position may seem a very roundabout way of getting at such familiar definitions as "a noun is a word used to name a person, place, thing, or idea," but it has its advantages. These familiar definitions work beautifully in selected sentences, but simply do not apply to the language as a whole unless we stretch them until they are practically meaningless. The reason is that we do not always use the same grammatical patterns to express the same ideas, and it is silly to pretend that we do. Look at the following sentences:

Sometimes he works and sometimes he loafs.
His industry and laziness alternate.
He is alternately industrious and lazy.
He acts industriously and lazily by spells.

Each of these conveys the same basic information; but the contrast between his working and his loafing is shown in the first sentence by verbs, in the second by nouns, in the third by adjectives, and in the fourth by adverbs. There just is no fixed relation between the meaning conveyed and the grammatical pattern used to convey it; and since we are discussing grammar, not philosophy, we'd better depend on the perceptible patterns.

The Forms of Words

The second element in our grammatical patterns is word form. Some words, like *always, into, must, tactics,* and *which,* have only one form; but most words have from two to five different forms called *inflections*. Inflected words fall into four groups, three of which may be divided into *regular* and *irregular* subgroups.

Inflected nouns

Regular: boy, boy's, boys, boys'
Irregular: man, man's, men, men's

Inflected pronouns

All *irregular:* I, me, my, mine, myself

Inflected verbs

Regular: save, saves, saved, saving
Irregular: take, takes, took, taken, taking

Inflected adjectives

Regular: big, bigger, biggest
Irregular: good, better, best

These are the only kinds of inflection in English. Such endings as *-al, -dom, -hood, -ic, -ish, -ize, -ly, -ment,* and *-ness* are considered to make different words rather·than different forms of the same word. (It is much simpler to accept the fact that this is so than to try to decide whether it should be.) They are called derivational suffixes, and will not be discussed here.

There are many thousands of regular nouns and regular verbs, and both groups are still growing. Whenever we adopt a new noun like *sputnik* everybody seems to assume at once that the only reasonable plural is *sputniks,* not *sputnak* or *sputniki.* In other words, we automatically treat it as a regular noun. And if we adopt a new verb, or make a new verb out of an old noun, we treat *it* as regular. As soon as we read that sputniks *orbit* we know that we can also say that they *orbited* or have *orbited,* not that they *orbat* or have *orbiten.* It is therefore only the regular nouns and verbs that are "open." There are about six hundred regular adjectives, and this class might be called "open at one end." Nobody knows why, but whenever we adopt a new two-syllable adjective ending in *-y,* such as *newsy* or *corny,* we give it the regular *-er* and *-est* endings. All other new adjectives are unchanging, and show degrees by *more* and *most.*

Nobody has much trouble with the spoken forms of these three regular groups, and the spelling of the written forms follows rather simple rules which will be given later. The four irregular groups are more difficult, since each word has to be learned individually. Fortunately these groups are much smaller than the regular ones, and are shrinking rather than growing. They will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Along with the four inflected groups we must consider one group of words that never change form but do have a characteristic form of their own—the *-ly* adverbs like *badly* and *wonderfully*. This is another open class; we feel free to add *-ly* to almost any adjective and thus make a new adverb, if we can find a use for it.

Function Words

Function words are words which are used to form grammatical patterns, and which cannot be changed without changing the patterns. Look at the following sentence:

The old man *had* cheerfully started *the* job *with a* sharp knife.

The words in ordinary type could be varied indefinitely without changing the pattern. We could find dozens of substitutes for *started* or *job*, and hundreds for each of the others. But if we change *the* to *an* or *had* to *has* or *with* to *on* we get a different pattern at once. *The* implies that you know which old man the sentence is about; *an* implies that you don't. *Has* puts the statement in a different time relation from *had*. And the things that you can reasonably do *on* a knife are quite different from those that you can do *with* it.

The difference between function words and others (sometimes called *content words*) is not absolutely sharp or reliable, and you can argue with the statements in the preceding paragraph if you care to. But if we consider the distinction as a matter of convenience rather than of desperate doctrine, we will find it useful. Function words are used principally to make up grammatical patterns; content words are used to fill those patterns and give them specific meanings. You have to know the meanings of the content words in a particular sentence to understand that sentence; but you have to know the ways most function words are used to understand English at all.

It is reasonably easy to divide content words into four classes—nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. A satisfactory classification of function words is a good deal more difficult. For the moment we will merely indicate three principal types:

1. Auxiliary verbs, like those italicized in the following verb-phrases: *will* go, *could* eat, *has* been, *is* going, *must have* seen.

2. Connectives, including all prepositions (*to, from, with,* etc.), conjunctions (*and, because,* etc.), and many words often called adverbs and pronouns (*there, when, which,* etc.).

3. Certain special modifiers of the kinds sometimes called determiners (*a, the, those,* etc.) and qualifiers (*very, quite,* etc.).

The Parts of Speech?

It may seem curious that we have discussed two different kinds of classification of words, one by function and one by form, without even mentioning the "parts of speech." But the fact is that the whole concept of parts of speech depends on a stable relation between form and function which has almost disappeared in our language. The concept can, of course, still be applied to modern English, but it no longer seems to be really useful; and those people who insist most strongly that there *are* parts of speech disagree about whether it is the function classes or the form classes that deserve this name. And those who take form as the basis disagree about whether it is simply the form of the words or the form of the patterns in which the words are used that must be considered.

Since there is no discoverable way of settling this argument (or of stopping it, either) we will simply disregard it. Anybody can call anything he wants to the parts of speech. Meanwhile we will try to make it clear whenever we are talking about form rather than function or function rather than form. When the two overlap (as they often do) we can use either set of terms safely as long as we don't over-generalize. Thus in the sentence "The best cost no more" we can say that *best* is an irregular adjective in form but a noun by function in this sentence; and we can call *cost* either an irregular verb or simply the verb without much danger of misleading anybody.

Conversion by Suffix

Earlier in the chapter we mentioned that endings other than inflections are called suffixes—for instance, *-dom, -ize, -ly,* and *-ment.* Suffixes are sometimes used to give words different meanings without changing their functional classification. Thus we have *gray* and *grayish,* both normally adjectives, and *man* and *manhood,* both normally nouns. More often suffixes convert words from one classification to another, as in the following examples:

Verbs to nouns: appease—appeasement, serve—service
Adjectives to nouns: free—freedom, happy—happiness
Nouns to verbs: atom—atomize, gas—gasify
Adjectives to verbs: dark—darken, tranquil—tranquilize

Nouns to adjectives: child—childish, man—manly
Adjectives to adverbs: glad—gladly, frantic—frantically

This kind of conversion is common in many languages, including Greek, Latin, and French, from which a great many English words come. It explains many of the related words in the language.

Functional Shift

Conversion of a word to a new function *without* the use of a suffix occurs much more often in English than in most other languages. This is known as *functional shift,* and it has gone so far as to make a single classification of words into parts of speech almost meaningless, as we have already suggested. The general tendency is to use any word in any way that is convenient and makes sense, without regard to its original classification. Thus we may use *work* as a noun (a *work* of art), a verb (they *work* hard), or an adjective (his *work* clothes). We cannot use it as a connective, not because of any grammatical rule, but simply because there is no way to do it. And nobody but a historian of the language has any reason to care about what its original part of speech may have been.

If a word shifts its function to that of a noun or a verb, it takes on the regular inflections of its new class. Thus the irregular noun *man* gives us the regular verb *to man,* with the forms *man, mans, manned, manning*. Likewise the irregular verb *to drink* gives us the regular noun *drink, drinks*. In other shifts of function no new inflections are needed.

Reason for Functional Shift

Quite obviously the underlying reason for functional shift is economy—either the use of a shorter word for a longer one or the use of a word instead of a phrase. Use of the plain form of a verb as a noun eliminates either the *-ing* inflectional ending (*talk* for *talking*) or a suffix (a *serve* for a *service* in tennis); and use of a noun as an adjective eliminates a suffix (*wool* clothes for *woolen* clothes, *atom* bomb for *atomic* bomb). On the other hand, use of an adjective as a noun often saves a word or more (*the poor* for *the poor people, the beautiful* for *that which is beautiful*). Verbs converted from nouns are particularly economical, though not always graceful. Thus

to requisition stands for *to put in a requisition for, to contact* for *to get in touch with.*

When the two kinds of economy conflict, the one that makes the greater overall saving generally wins out—at least in circles where efficiency is more prized than grace. Thus *to certificate* is longer than *to certify,* but shorter than *to furnish with a certificate.* It is therefore often used when the certification consists of supplying a document rather than guaranteeing a statement.

Limits to Functional Shift

The fact remains that many functional shifts that might well have taken place have not done so. Sometimes this is because a familiar word that makes a shift unnecessary is already available. Thus the verb *to man* made it unnecessary to convert *boy, girl,* or *woman* into verbs. Juveniles or females can *man* a boat. Fifty years ago, when automobiles were still competing with carriages, we used *to auto* down to the beach, since *to drive* was not sufficiently specific, and any other available expression would have been longer. Now that carriages have practically disappeared the one-syllable verb *drive* clearly means to go by automobile. *To auto* is no longer economical, and there would not be enough saving in *to car* to make it worth while.

At other times we have simply failed to make a shift for no discoverable reason. Thus we say *to reward* and *a reward, to punish* but *a punishment.* A noun *punish* may develop in the future, but it has not yet done so. Moreover, some shifts that certainly have developed are often condemned. That is, although the general principle of functional shift is universally accepted, a few individual shifts have become shibboleths. We often hear that *like* must never be used as a conjunction, that *than* and *as* must never be used as prepositions, and that *loan* and *contact* must never be used as verbs.

To object to these uses on the basis of any grammatical theory is simply silly. Thousands of other words have extended their functions in exactly comparable ways, and there is not the slightest reason why this handful should not do the same. If we must condemn such expressions we should do so by making the honest statement that there is a certain amount of prejudice against them—just as there is now a prejudice against calling a man "a certain party" or a woman "an elegant female"—though there is no doubt whatever that *party* and *female* are, in other expressions, acceptable as nouns.

Intonation Patterns

So far we have dealt only with those elements of our grammatical patterns which are visible as well as audible. In spoken English at least three other elements would be perceptible (though not necessarily recognizable by people without some training). These can sometimes be suggested in writing, but cannot be indicated as explicitly as the first three. Compare the two following sentences:

Jack put salt in his coffee.
Jack put salt in his *coffee?*

Since these are identical in all three of the elements so far discussed, many people would call them "the same sentence punctuated in two different ways." But, intelligently read, they sound different and they mean different things—which should be enough to make them different sentences. The fact that the differences do not appear as clearly in writing as they do in speech proves only that our system of writing is imperfect—it indicates some differences less clearly than others. If you read both sentences aloud carefully and naturally you will see that they vary in three ways:

1. The first syllable of *coffee* is pronounced more strongly in the second sentence than in the first. This is a difference in *stress*.

2. This syllable is also pronounced on a lower musical tone, and the next one on a higher tone. These are differences in *pitch*.

3. At the end of the first sentence the voice comes down in pitch as it fades into silence. At the end of the second it does not. This is a difference in *juncture*. In order to make the comparison as simple as possible we have shown the difference in stress, pitch, and juncture only at the ends of the two sentences, but they occur throughout. Every syllable that is pronounced at all must be pronounced with some degree of stress and at some pitch; and whenever two successive words are not completely run together the transition between them can be called juncture. Thus *white house* has a kind of juncture not found in *Whitehouse;* the sort of pause often shown by a comma is a second kind; and the rising and falling tones as your voice fades off after different kinds of sentences are two others.

It is possible to indicate all these things consistently by a special system of writing—the stress by accent marks, the pitch by numbers, and the juncture by special symbols. Thus the second sentence might be written as follows:

^{2}Jâck+pùt+sâlt+in+his+^{1}cóffee^{3}↑

(It might also be indicated in several other ways.) This more com-

plete system of writing is very useful for experts who wish to make a detailed analysis of our sound patterns, but it is a little cumbersome for ordinary use. Most of us would rather get along with just a few hints, such as the italicizing of *coffee* and the question mark at the end. Moreover, experts are still disagreeing about such questions as how many degrees of stress and pitch are significant, and how regular and dependable are our uses of these elements. We are not therefore going into these matters in much detail. But we should realize that the experts are right in principle—these elements are quite as real as the first three, and at least some of the time they are quite as important. We shall see this when we come to consider the structure of sentences in Chapter 5.

Stress, pitch, and juncture together make up *intonation*. Every spoken sentence must have its pattern of intonation; and every good written sentence at least suggests one. If you don't believe intonation is as real or as important as the other sounds, perhaps you can remember a time when you were seriously misquoted by somebody who claimed to be repeating exactly what you had said, and who did repeat the same words in the same order—but who changed the intonation pattern so as to give an entirely different meaning.

Exercises—Chapter 3

Answer each of the following questions simply and briefly.

1. Name the main elements in the patterns of written English.
2. In discussing patterns of grammar, you may substitute the term *relative position* for what other term?
3. In forming grammatical patterns, what are words like *a, and, the, with* called?
4. We may divide *content* words rather easily into what *four* classes?
5. Where do auxiliary verbs and connectives fit into the patterns of grammar?
6. Name the four groups of words that are subject to inflection.
7. Three of these four groups (#6 above) inflect both regularly and irregularly. Which one does not? How does the fourth group inflect?
8. Word endings like *-dom, -hood, -ic, -ish,* and *-ize* are not to be confused with inflections. What are such endings called?
9. Roughly speaking, what percentage of all English words are included in the four categories, *nouns, verbs, adjectives* and *adverbs?*
10. Words that inflect *irregularly* are becoming increasingly outnumbered by those which inflect *regularly*. Why?

11. The words *simulcast* and *telemeter*, originally nouns, will probably come into general use as verbs (if they haven't already done so). How are they likely to inflect as verbs? Why?
12. The process of converting a word to a new functional class without the use of a suffix is referred to by what term?
13. Add a suffix to a noun without changing its functional classification. To another noun add a suffix which *does* change the word class.
14. Avoiding examples already given, illustrate the following conversions by suffix: a verb to a noun, an adjective to a noun, a noun to a verb, an adjective to a verb, a noun to an adjective, and an adjective to an adverb.
15. List three examples of functional shift not already used in the text.
16. Write two sentences (or three if possible) in which the same word is used in a different functional capacity (noun, verb, adjective, perhaps).
17. What is the underlying reason for functional shift?
18. What kind of patterns do *stress*, *pitch*, and *juncture* involve?
19. By what term do we refer to the degree of forcefulness with which a syllable is pronounced?
20. The intonational transition between any two spoken words that are not completely run together is referred to by what term?
21. Which of the following pairs of words change by inflection and which by the addition of suffixes: bone-bony, be-been, steal-stolen, song-songs?
22. Which of the following pairs change by inflection and which by the addition of suffixes: easy-easily, hardy-hardihood, pastor-pastoral, day-day's?
23. Is *chin* a noun, a verb, or an adjective? Explain and illustrate.
24. Is *toy* a noun, a verb, or an adjective? Explain and illustrate.
25. Is *rest* a noun, a verb, or an adjective? Explain and illustrate.

Suggestions for Discussion or Theme Writing—Chapter 3

1. Explain a number of different ways you can change the implication of the following sentence by changing the intonation pattern. (For a starter, try shifting the *stress* from one content word to another.):

Mother said she was unable to drive to the beach with you all today.

2. Discuss the effect of the concept of *functional shift* on the traditional concept of *parts of speech*. (You might wish to use the words *wrong*, *fast* and *outside* to illustrate your point.)

4 THE FORMS OF WORDS

Inflections

In the last chapter we pointed out that words may be classified by either form or use, and that form and use overlap but do not perfectly coincide. For instance, *boy* has the forms *boy, boy's, boys,* and *boys'* which are typical of regular nouns; and it is used as a noun—that is, to name something being talked about—most of the time. But it may also be used as an adjective, as in the expression *boy baby*. On the other hand, *poor* has the forms of a regular adjective, *poor, poorer,* and *poorest,* and is generally used as an adjective; but it may also be used as a noun in such sentences as "The *poor* are suffering." There are times when the classification by use is important, but for the rest of this chapter we shall consider only the classification by form, since this is the only way we can lay out all the inflected words of the language in an arrangement that is both systematic and reasonably simple.

Inflected Nouns

Nouns may have as many as four forms, plain and possessive in the singular and plain and possessive in the plural:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
Plain	A *boy* is here. A *man* is here.	Three *boys* came. Three *men* came.
Possessive	A *boy's* dog. A *man's* dog.	The two *boys'* dogs. The two *men's* dogs.

Many nouns do not have the possessive forms, and are thus inflected only for number. A few (mostly kinds of fish and game) do not have

separate forms for their plurals (*salmon, trout, deer, elk*). Nouns which have neither a possessive nor a separate plural form are of course uninflected and will not be considered here.

Notice that the plain plural form *boys* has no apostrophe, but that all the possessive forms have one. If you are confused by possessive forms it is probably because there are several different systems in use. The following system, which is the simplest and most consistent, is at least as good as any of the others:

1. Write the appropriate plain form, singular or plural.
2. Add an apostrophe to indicate the possessive form.
3. Then add an *-s* unless you have already added one to form the plural.

Regular Noun Plurals

All nouns which add an /s/, /z/, or /iz/ sound (spelled *-s* or *-es*) to form the plural are considered *regular,* in spite of minor variations. Since most students can choose correctly between the three plural sounds more easily than they can learn rules about them, the following rules will deal only with the spelling of the written forms.

1. Most words form their plurals by adding simple *-s: bat-bats, place-places,* etc.
2. When *-s* alone would make an unpronounceable combination, *-es* is added: *box-boxes, match-matches, loss-losses,* etc.
3. Six common words ending in *-o* form their plurals in *-es: echoes, heroes, Negroes, potatoes, tomatoes,* and *torpedoes.* (So do eleven others which are much less common, at least in the plural, if you want to know: *bilboes, buboes, dadoes, dingoes, embargoes, goes, innuendoes, jingoes, mulattoes, noes,* and *vetoes.*) All other words ending in *-o* either may or must be written with *-s* plurals.
4. Words ending in *-y* preceded by a consonant take a plural in *-ies: copy-copies, lady-ladies,* etc.

When the *-y* is preceded by a vowel there is no such change: *boy-boys, monkey-monkeys,* etc.

5. Words ending in *-f* or *-fe* take a plural in *-ves* if the sound changes: *half-halves, wife-wives;* but *belief-beliefs, safe-safes.*

Irregular English Plurals

A few common native English words form their plurals in some other manner than by adding *-s* or *-es*. Fortunately, they are all so well known that they give little trouble. They are:

child-children	louse-lice	ox-oxen
foot-feet	man-men	tooth-teeth
goose-geese	mouse-mice	woman-women

Foreign Plurals

The English language has borrowed thousands of nouns from other languages, particularly Greek and Latin. It used to be the general practice to borrow both the singular and plural forms. Since the result was bewildering to those who knew only English, many people took a great deal of pride in their ability to handle such pairs as the following:

alumna-alumnae	dogma-dogmata
cactus-cacti	corpus-corpora

In the last fifty years or so, however, there have been two important changes:

1. New words have been introduced only in the singular, and have formed their plurals in the normal English way. Even the most learned people say *electrons* and *protons* instead of *electra* and *prota*.
2. Regular English plurals in *-s* or *-es* have developed alongside of the foreign plurals for most foreign words which are in reasonably common use, as the following list indicates:

SINGULAR	FOREIGN PLURAL	REGULAR PLURAL
appendix	appendices	appendixes
bureau	bureaux	bureaus
curriculum	curricula	curriculums
enema	enemata	enemas
focus	foci	focuses
ganglion	ganglia	ganglions

There are still some people who think the foreign plurals are better just because they are older; and there are others who apparently use them just to prove that they can. But the prevailing tend-

ency is certainly in favor of regularity and simplicity. Foreign plurals tend to remain in use only under one of the following conditions:

a. The words are rather learned technical terms not in common use: *homunculus-homunculi; phylum-phyla.*

b. The plural forms occur much oftener than the singular: *datum-data; bacterium-bacteria.*

c. An *-s* would cause three *s* sounds in a row: *crisis-crises,* not *crisises.*

So much progress in this direction has been made that the following rules are now quite safe:

1. If you are used to hearing an *-s* plural, use it confidently.
2. If you are pretty sure that an *-s* plural is not correct, use the table below:

NOUNS ENDING IN	TAKE A PLURAL IN
-a (alumna)	-ae (alumnae—pronounced *-ay* or *ee*)
-us (alumnus)	-i (alumni—pronounced *-eye*)
-on (phenomenon)	-a (phenomena)
-um (bacterium)	-a (bacteria)
-sis (thesis)	-ses (theses—pronounced *-eez*)

Compound Nouns

Most compound nouns now regularly take the plural *-s* on the end, even if it did not originally belong there: *cupfuls, jack-in-the-boxes.* There are a few exceptions when the first part of the compound is the main word, and is described by what follows:

brothers-in-law	commanders-in-chief
courts-martial	passers-by

Even these words show a tendency to shift the *-s* to the end. All our good dictionaries now list *attorney generals* along with *attorneys general,* and the newest one (*Webster's New World Dictionary*) lists *court-martials* as well as *courts-martial.* If you are in doubt and can't look it up it is advisable to put the *-s* on the end, on the theory that natural ignorance is better than affectation.

To indicate possession, all compound nouns and groups of words

that form a unit put the *'s* on the end: my *brother-in-law's* car; the *King of England's* doctor; *anybody else's* opinion.

Inflected Pronouns

There are eight simple inflected pronouns, listed below with all their forms.

SUBJECT FORMS	OBJECT FORMS	POSSESSIVE FORMS
I	me	my, mine
he	him	his
she	her	her, hers
it	it	its
we	us	our, ours
you	you	your, yours
they	them	their, theirs
who	whom	whose

Notice that:

1. Most of them have separate "subject" and "object" forms where nouns have one plain form.
2. Their possessive forms do *not* have an apostrophe, and some of them do not have an *-s*.
3. Most of them have two different possessive forms, one used when they are followed by the noun they modify (That is *my* book), the other when they stand alone (That book is *mine*).

The first seven pronouns are often called *personal pronouns*. The easiest thing to call the other one is simply *who*.

The Compound Personal Pronouns

The personal pronouns are combined with *self* and *selves* to form the following compound pronouns:

SINGULAR	PLURAL
myself	ourselves
yourself	yourselves
himself	themselves
herself	
itself	
ourself (reserved for kings, queens, and editors)	

Notice that some of these are based on the object forms of the simple pronouns, others on the possessive forms. It is important to get these straight, because such forms as "hisself" and "theirselves" are generally considered to be signs of great ignorance.

These words are used both to show "reflexive action" (he cut *himself*) and to show special emphasis (he did it *himself*). They are sometimes called "reflexive pronouns" in the first use and "intensive pronouns" or "intensive adjectives" in the second, but except in comparing English with a foreign language these terms are quite useless.

Compound Forms of *Who*

The compound pronoun *whoever* has the natural object form *whomever,* but the possessive form varies, appearing as *whosever, whose-ever, whose ever,* and even *whoever's*. With so much choice, it is hard to go definitely wrong.

Inflected Verbs

There are at most ten uninflected verbs in the standard language. *Must* and *ought* have only one form apiece, and on the whole it seems better to consider *could, might, should,* and *would* as now separate from *can, may, shall,* and *will* rather than as the past tenses of these verbs, though there are arguments for the opposite opinion. All other verbs except *to be* (see page 60) have from three to five inflected forms, and one phrase form that occurs so frequently it needs a name. These are:

	REGULAR	IRREGULAR
The plain form	walk	write
The singular form	walks	writes
The past tense	walked	wrote
The past participle	(walked)	written
The present participle	walking	writing
The infinitive	to walk	to write

Only about 45 verbs have a separate form for the past participle. The rest extend the use of the past tense form. However, it is convenient to call *walked* a past participle whenever it is used in a way parallel to *written*. Some grammarians call the plain form an

infinitive whenever it comes directly after another verb (will *walk*, must *write*), but in this book the term infinitive always means the plain form preceded by *to*. Since the singular form and present participle are always (except in the verb *to be*) formed regularly from the plain form, the only difficulties are the past tenses of about 140 irregular verbs and the separate past participles of about 45 of these.

Strong and Weak Verbs

The division of English verbs into "strong" and "weak" classes, each containing subclasses, is useful in studying the earlier stages of the language, and is worth a few words of explanation here. The strong verbs originally formed their past tenses by a vowel change (*sing, sang*), while the weak verbs formed theirs by the addition of *-ede, -ode,* or *-de,* which later developed into *-d, -ed,* or *-t*. A thorough study of the laws of sound change shows that even such curious pairs as *bring-brought* have developed according to a regular process.

However, comparatively few people have time to make such a study; and a superficial approach to it merely causes unnecessary confusion (for instance, *bleed-bled* and *feed-fed,* which seem to meet the definition of strong verbs, are historically weak). Fortunately, this difficult subject is not in the least necessary in mastering the contemporary language. The important questions for a student of Modern English are simply whether a verb is regular or irregular; and, if it is irregular, how?

Regular Verbs

Most English verbs are now completely regular, so that if we see any one form we can be sure of what the others will be, even if we have never seen the verb before and have not the slightest idea what it means. The only things we have to watch in these verbs are certain general spelling principles discussed on pages 159-160.

Irregular Verbs

About 140 English verbs, most of them in very common use, are

in some degree irregular. All but two of them (*begin* and *forsake*) are monosyllables, though some of them have compounds which follow the same pattern as the simple verbs (*get, forget; take, overtake*). There are a few other verbs which have both regular and irregular forms in good use, such as *thrive-thrived* (or *throve*). These are not included in the lists below unless the irregular forms are decidedly more usual.

Some optional irregular forms are as acceptable as the regular forms, but they are omitted here to simplify the picture. Anyone who finds that he uses an irregular form not listed here can easily check it in a dictionary to see whether it is in good standing. But if he masters the following lists he can be confident that he knows all the irregular forms *required* by standard usage. Even those verbs which are irregular only in spelling (*pay, paid*) are included.

Verbs with No Separate Past Tense

The following verbs ordinarily use the plain form for the past tense and past participle as well as the present. The forms *betted, quitted, ridded, wedded,* and *wetted* are common in British usage, but rare in American.

bet	hurt	shut
bid	let	slit
burst	put	split
cast	quit	spread
cost	rid	thrust
cut	set	wed
hit	shed	wet

Verbs that Add *-d* Irregularly

The following verbs form their past tenses with *-d,* but not in the regular way:

flee	fled	pay	paid
have	had	say	said
hear	heard	sell	sold
lay	laid	shoe	shod (also *shoed*)
make	made	tell	told

Verbs that Change *-d* to *-t*

The following verbs form their past tenses by changing *-d* to *-t:*

bend	bent	rend	rent
build	built	send	sent
lend	lent	spend	spent

Verbs that Add *-t*

The following verbs form their past tenses by adding *-t,* and making some other change, at least in sound:

bring	brought	leave	left
buy	bought	lose	lost
catch	caught	mean	meant
creep	crept	seek	sought
deal	dealt	sleep	slept
dwell	dwelt (also *dwelled*)	sweep	swept
		teach	taught
feel	felt	think	thought
keep	kept	weep	wept
kneel	knelt (also *kneeled*)		

Vowel-Change Verbs with No Separate Past Participle

The following verbs form their past tenses by a change in the vowel, at least in sound. They do not add *-d* or *-t,* although some of them end with these letters in both present and past:

bind	bound	meet	met
bleed	bled	read	read (pronounced *red*)
breed	bred	shine	shone (also *shined*)[2]
dig	dug	shoot	shot
feed	fed	sit	sat
fight	fought	slide	slid
find	found	spit	spat (also *spit*)
grind	ground	stand	stood
hang	hung (also *hanged*)[1]	stick	stuck
hold	held	strike	struck
lead	led	win	won
light	lit (also *lighted*)	wind	wound

[1] *Hanged* is used only in reference to death by hanging.
[2] "The sun *shone,*" but "He *shined* the shoes."

The *-in-, -un-* and *-in-, -an-, -un-* Verbs

All of the following verbs have *-u* in the past participle, and all but five may unquestionably have it in the past tense as well. The simplest procedure is to learn to say *I began, I drank, I rang, I sang,* and *I swam,* and use the *u* form everywhere else. You can even find dictionary support for *I begun, I rung,* and *I sung,* but these three forms are now generally considered wrong.

begin	I began	I have begun
drink	I drank	I have drunk
ring	I rang	I have rung
sing	I sang	I have sung
swim	I swam	I have swum
shrink	I shrank *or* shrunk	I have shrunk
sink	I sank *or* sunk	I have sunk
spring	I sprang *or* sprung	I have sprung
stink	It stank *or* stunk	It has stunk
cling	I clung	I have clung
fling	I flung	I have flung
sling	I slung	I have slung
slink	I slunk	I have slunk
spin	I spun	I have spun
sting	I stung	I have stung
string	I strung	I have strung
swing	I swung	I have swung
wring	I wrung	I have wrung

Verbs Having *n* in the Past Participle

The following verbs have separate past participles containing *n,* sometimes preceded or followed by *e*. In standard English the forms with the *n* are never used in the simple past tense, but only in verb-phrases or as modifiers.

bear	I bore	I have borne
beat	I beat	I have beaten
bite	I bit	I have bitten (sometimes *bit*)
blow	I blew	I have blown
break	I broke	I have broken

choose	I chose	I have chosen
do	I did	I have done
draw	I drew	I have drawn
drive	I drove	I have driven
eat	I ate	I have eaten
fall	I fell	I have fallen
fly	I flew	I have flown
forsake	I forsook	I have forsaken
freeze	I froze	I have frozen
get	I got	I have gotten, got
give	I gave	I have given
go	I went	I have gone
grow	I grew	I have grown
hide	I hid	I have hidden (sometimes *hid*)
know	I knew	I have known
lie	I lay	I have lain
ride	I rode	I have ridden
rise	I rose	I have risen
see	I saw	I have seen
shake	I shook	I have shaken
slay	I slew	I have slain
smite	I smote	I have smitten
speak	I spoke	I have spoken
steal	I stole	I have stolen
stride	I strode	I have stridden
swear	I swore	I have sworn
take	I took	I have taken
tear	I tore	I have torn
throw	I threw	I have thrown
tread	I trod	I have trodden (sometimes *trod*)
wear	I wore	I have worn
weave	I wove	I have woven (sometimes *weaved*)[3]
write	I wrote	I have written

[3] Especially in such a use as "He *weaved* his way through the crowd."

Come and Run

These two verbs are exceptional in that their plain forms rather than their past tenses are used as past participles.

come	I came	I have come
run	I ran	I have run

The Verb *To Be*

The verb *to be* is a mixture of three old verbs (*aren, beon,* and *wesan*), which accounts for the wide differences in its forms. It is unique in having three present-tense forms (*am, are,* and *is*), none of which is identical with the plain form; and separate singular and plural forms (*was* and *were*) in the past tense. It also has the plain form (*be*), the present participle (*being*), and the past participle (*been*), for a total of eight forms, or three more than any other verb in the language.

Inflected Adjectives

Most adjectives of one syllable and many of two syllables (especially those ending in -*y*) are inflected to show degree: *hot, hotter, hottest; pretty, prettier, prettiest. Hot* is called the positive form, *hotter* the comparative, and *hottest* the superlative. This type of inflection is called comparison.

Adjectives of more than two syllables are not inflected in standard usage, but show degrees by *more* and *most* (*more beautiful, most beautiful,* etc.). Some adjectives of one and two syllables are treated in the same way, particularly those ending in -*ful* and -*ish*. There is no logical reason for this difference in treatment—it is simply a habit that has developed. When in doubt, it is safer to use *more* and *most*.

Some people have argued that such adjectives as *black, straight,* and *perfect* should not be compared in either way, because their meaning is absolute and not a matter of degree. According to this theory we should say "more nearly black," etc. However, *blacker, straightest, more perfect,* etc. are quite understandable, and are certainly in standard use.

Irregular Comparison

A few adjectives have irregular comparative and superlative forms. The most common of these are:

PLAIN FORM	COMPARATIVE FORM	SUPERLATIVE FORM
bad	worse	worst
far	farther	farthest
	further	furthest
good	better	best

little	less	least
	littler	littlest
	lesser	
many	more	most
much		
old	older	oldest
	elder	eldest

Elder, eldest, and *lesser* are not used much now except in a few set phrases, such as *elder statesman, eldest son,* and *lesser of two evils. Farther-farthest* and *further-furthest* are interchangeable as adjectives, though only *further* is used as a verb ("He *furthered* his brother's career"). *Littler* and *littlest* are generally used for physical size, *less* and *least* for all other purposes ("He found the *littlest* boy without the *least* trouble").

Such words as *utmost, topmost,* and *northmost* are often called irregular superlative forms, but it is simpler to consider them as separate words.

-ly Adverbs

Most of our adverbs are formed from adjectives by adding *-ly* (or *-ally* if the adjective ends in *-ic*). The fact that some adjectives such as *friendly* and *manly* also end in *-ly* causes some confusion. This can be avoided by remembering that *uninflected* words ending in *-ly* are all adverbs; *inflected* words with this ending may be adjectives, nouns (*jelly, tally*), or verbs (*to rely, to tally*).

Since the *-ly* ending is not considered an inflection, mention of adverbs may seem out of place here; but it is convenient to indicate that most of them are derived from and paired with adjectives.

Exercises—Chapter 4

1. Give a noun which does not have a separate form for its plural.
2. What is the maximum number of forms a noun can have in English? What are they called?
3. List the three steps given in the chapter for selecting the appropriate possessive form of a noun.
4. List the six common nouns ending in *-o* which form their plurals in *-es*.

5. The plural of *wife* is *wives,* while the plural of *belief* is *beliefs.* What distinction helps determine the pattern for the plural in words ending in *-f* or *-fe?*
6. What consideration is involved in determining the pattern for the plural of words ending in *-y?*
7. Which of the following nouns form their plurals irregularly: *blouse, goose, moose, mouse, louse, house?*
8. List both the *foreign* and the *accepted* English plurals of three foreign nouns in common use in English.
9. Under what conditions do foreign plurals tend to remain in use (in English)?
10. What form does the possessive take in all compound nouns and groups of words that form a unit?
11. List three ways the forms of the simple inflected *pronouns* differ from the general pattern of *noun* inflections.
12. With the exception of the word *who,* what label extends to the remaining seven simple inflected pronouns?
13. In mastering English verbs, what simple classification is more essential than the knowledge that a given verb is *strong* or *weak?*
14. Give a regular verb (besides *walk*) and carry it through its various forms: the plain form, the singular, the past tense, the past participle, the present participle, and the infinitive.
15. While the *irregular* verbs consume a disproportionate amount of a student's time, there are relatively few of them—about how many in all?
16. *Put, rid* and *shut* have no separate past tense form. List two more such verbs.
17. List three verbs which form their past tense with *-d,* but not in the regular way.
18. *Bend* and *build* form their past tenses by changing *-d* to *-t.* List two other verbs which do the same.
19. Verbs like *feel* form their past tenses by adding *-t,* and making some other change, at least in sound. List three more.
20. What characterizes the change in form in such verbs as *bleed, fight,* and *hold?*
21. What is the past tense form of *sink, fling, swing,* and *swim?*
22. Two very common verbs form the past participles with the plain forms rather than their past tense forms. What are these two?
23. The words *aren, beon* and *wesan* are all old forms of what verb? How many forms does that verb *now* have?
24. List the positive, comparative, and superlative forms of these adjectives: *cold, elegant,* and *good.*
25. How are adverbs generally formed? Is this inflection?

Suggestions for Discussion or Theme Writing—Chapter 4

1. Using the noun *cat*, the verb *trade*, and the adjective *slow*, summarize the inflection patterns of regular nouns, verbs and adjectives in English.

2. Discuss the kinds of information which may be conveyed in writing through the variety of inflections (word forms) available to the writer.